

Greens drive party to brink of irrelevance

The Toronto Star

October 3, 2021 Sunday

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Section: OPINION; Pg. IN7

Length: 708 words

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Body

After less than one year leading the Green Party of Canada, Annamie Paul has fallen on her sword. Her departure is the culmination of months of turmoil and backbiting by the party, at a time when it already faces the threat of extinction.

While as of Friday Paul's resignation is technically still pending, her speech this week made it clear she can no longer lead a party whose members have attacked her, challenged her and undercut her at every turn.

Who can blame her?

Since last year, Paul's leadership has been menaced by a party apparatus entirely unwilling to support her. Now, after betting everything on a seat in Toronto Centre and placing fourth, it is hard to see how Paul could remain as a legitimate leader.

While I'm only an observer, from my vantage point, the fault lies more with the party than with the leader.

And remember, it did not need to be this way.

When Annamie Paul first came on the scene, she injected some vigour into a party increasingly lacking in purpose. As a seriously credentialed, relatively moderate and compelling woman leader, Paul brought a vibrancy that was sorely lacking from Canadian politics. She spoke frankly about the challenges of being the first Black woman and first Jewish woman to lead a federal party.

What's more, she seemed to understand that the party needed to change to overcome its turmoil at the time.

The resignation of Elizabeth May in 2019 meant the familiar, friendly face of Green politics in Canada would no longer insulate the party from the creeping doubts of voters.

It also meant there was no figurehead to keep the party's worst divisions under wraps.

A vacuum of power, it seems, did not help things. Far from it: when Annamie Paul took the reins, infighting among members, MPs and party officials seemed rampant. Although really, that was nothing new - the Greens in Canada are a notoriously large tent, and the party is defined by an aversion to orthodoxy.

Fine, intraparty squabbles are no big deal. But for this infighting to overshadow what should have been the honeymoon period for their new leader, something had gone very wrong. And at a time when Canadians care more than ever about climate action, the Greens slowly lost their seat at the table for a new era in our politics. They may never reclaim it.

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The reason for that sorry assessment is that a unique paradox has defined the rise of Canada's Greens. For years, the Green party had to fight for serious mention of climate change and environmental policies to be included in political discourse.

In those days, very few mainstream politicians discussed climate change, and even fewer raised serious solutions to address it.

So the Greens got to work. Under successive leaders, the party attempted to convince Canadians that climate change was not just a fundamental issue - it was in fact the fundamental issue. And at the same time, they worked to make themselves more palatable and electable.

The problem is, as Canadians grew more comfortable with climate action and green policies, these things became table stakes for every political party. Along the way, the Greens successfully fought their way toward irrelevance. That is the challenge the party faces today.

At the same time, we must remember that the reason green policies are commonplace today is because climate action is wildly popular with Canadian voters. The question is whether the Greens can meaningfully tap into that sentiment. In recent elections, they have failed.

Now, with Paul stepping down, the party's worst demons seemed poised to consume it. And based on her personal experience, there are far more insidious currents - of racism, anti-Semitism and more - in the party that must be addressed head on.

Annamie Paul was never given a chance to succeed. But on that day in October 2020 when she took the stage for the first time, she appeared to have the stuff to lead her party out of the political wilderness. On reflection, her tenure has driven the Greens deeper into the woods.

After what the party has done to her - so publicly and viciously - there may now be no turning back.

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Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Publication-Type: Newspaper

Journal Code: TTA

Subject: ELECTIONS & POLITICS (89%); CLIMATE CHANGE (86%); RESIGNATIONS (77%); REPORTS, REVIEWS & SECTIONS (74%); JEWS & JUDAISM (65%); CLIMATE ACTION (60%); CLIMATE CHANGE REGULATION & POLICY (60%); ENVIRONMENT & NATURAL RESOURCES (60%); ENVIRONMENTAL REGULATION & POLICY (60%); EDITORIALS & OPINIONS (59%)

Geographic: TORONTO, ON, CANADA (79%); ONTARIO, CANADA (58%); CANADA (94%)

Load-Date: October 9, 2021

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